Democrats invoke Holocaust to denounce GOP welfare bill

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WASHINGTON (AP) – Promising to break the chains of a welfare system that has "enslaved" millions of poor Americans, Republicans took the centerpiece of their social agenda to the House floor Tuesday. Democrats invoked the Holocaust as they denounced the welfare overhaul as "downright low down."

The GOP's bill repeals dozens of anti-poverty programs and sends the money to the states in lump sum payments, shrinks spending by $66.4 billion, and erases the federal government's New Deal guarantee of support for single mothers and their children.

Food stamps, school lunches, foster care and aid to disabled children would also be fundamentally changed under the blueprint as states are given a free hand to design their own welfare programs.

Democrats attacked the legislation as a callous, coldhearted and mean-spirited attack on children. Tempers quickly rose as the debate, which could continue all week, got under way.

"They're coming for our children, they're coming for the poor, they're coming for the sick, the elderly, the disabled. This is the Contract With America," declared Rep. John Lewis, D-Ga., who alluded to Nazi persecution during the Holocaust.

Rep. Clay Shaw, R-Fla., lashed back.

"For you to come on this floor and compare the Republicans with the reign of the Nazis is an absolute outrage," Mr. Shaw said.

Mr. Shaw, chairman of a House Ways and Means subcommittee that wrote the heart of the bill, said that under the legislation, welfare will be transformed into "temporary help, not a way of life."

Ways and Means Committee Chairman Bill Archer, R-Texas, said Tuesday's debate begins the demise of "the failed welfare state that has entrapped the nation's needy for far too long."

"This bill will reverse the decades-long federal policy of rewarding unacceptable and self-destructive behavior. We will no longer reward people for doing the wrong thing," he said.

Some Democrats acknowledged that the welfare system was broken and called it a plague on society that discourages work and marriage and encourages dependency.

"Welfare was intended to be a safety net for widows and children but it has become a hammock that has encouraged laziness and idleness," said Rep. Blanche Lambert Lincoln, D-Ark.

Only 12 percent of welfare recipients, she said, are actually working while "we've been paying the other 88 percent to sit at home and watch their mailboxes. The federal government has been making bigger promises than Publisher's Clearinghouse," she said.

Other Democrats denounced the GOP's solution.